



# End of Life Planning

Why is Planning Important?

How to Get Started on Making These Decisions

End of Life Planning Guide Examples

## Why is Planning Important?

Few of us are really ready for the hard choices that may have to be made at the end of life. It can be hard for everyone involved - the dying person, their family and loved ones, as well as health care providers. Planning in advance for these decisions helps to make difficult decisions easier.



A major success of our health care system is that more Americans live longer and have healthier lives than ever before. However, this longer life span poses a new set of challenges. Nearly all-elderly Americans now encounter severe chronic illness and disability in the last stages of life. The truth is, death in today's America is rarely swift. Most of the elderly will not have short-term acute illnesses resulting in death. Instead, they could be disabled for many months, perhaps years, by diseases such as heart disease, emphysema, stroke, dementia, and certain cancers (e.g., breast and prostate cancer). Along the way, there will be episodes of serious complications.

This period is often stressful for families and costly. Ultimately, many will reach a point where medical technology may be able to keep them alive, but can neither restore their health nor improve their condition. In fact, more treatment may be merely prolonging dying. At that point, patients and families face difficult choices about the kind of care they want. For most of us who find ourselves in these circumstances, dying has become the last chapter of our life-story, a time fraught with new challenges and hard decisions.

Because we live within webs of social and professional relationships, (family, school, work, health care, faith) these difficult decisions cross the boundaries of health care, legal matters, finances, family, and personal relationships. For many people, the end of life is a call to complete unfinished family and personal affairs. It also offers us an opportunity to reexamine relationships and communicate with those close to us. There may be questions you want to personally answer, and not allow circumstances to force these decisions upon already emotionally stressed family members. For example:

- Who would you want to make health care decisions for you if you could not make them for yourself?
- What legal documents should be prepared (e.g., wills, trusts, power of attorney, health care directives)?
- What decisions do you want to make about the type of life support or medical care you receive? Life-support treatment includes medical devices to help you breathe, food and water supplied by tube feeding, cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR), and anything else meant to keep you alive.
- If you were going to die next week, what would remain undone in your life? How would you want to spend your remaining time?
- Do you wish to donate useable organs or tissues, as allowed by law?

While it is true that you cannot anticipate every decision you may need to make, learning about your choices in advance can give patients and families a sense of control, even at the end-of-life... relieving any unnecessary pain and suffering.

Sharing information about your wishes allows others to understand and respect your preferences when you may no longer be able to speak for yourself. It also eases the tension families and loved ones experience during a last illness or injury.

## How to Get Started on Making These Decisions

As already mentioned, end-of-life decisions need to be discussed by patients, family members and physicians. It is best to have such a discussion before a crisis occurs that would require a decision in a time of stress.

Keep in mind, as with any other treatment, you are entitled to a second opinion from another physician. Some states even require that two physicians be involved in ordering the withdrawal or withholding of life-prolonging treatment. Additionally, a physician who feels he or she cannot ethically carry out the requests of a family or patient may withdraw from your case.

The intent of this document is to refer you to resources to help you, your family, and your friends think about these important issues now, while you are able to respond with reflective thought. Making these decisions now will help you and your loved ones find peace of mind in the future. Because our preferences may change over time, you may wish to revisit your decisions periodically and modify them as necessary.

There are a number of guides available that are designed to help you think about and talk about end-of-life issues. Again, planning in advance for these difficult decisions will help relieve any unnecessary pain and suffering for you and your loved ones.

## End of Life Planning Guide Examples:

- **Five Wishes** - is a widely used guide that helps you and those close to you plan the kind of care you want to receive if you become seriously ill. It discusses your personal, emotional, and spiritual needs, as well as your medical wishes. Written with the help of the American Bar Association's Commission on the Legal Problems of the Elderly, it substantially meets the requirements under the law in 35 states and the District of Columbia. Copies are available for a small fee through Aging with Dignity, P.O. Box 1661, Tallahassee, Florida 32302, telephone number 1-888-594-7437, website: [www.agingwithdignity.org](http://www.agingwithdignity.org).
- **Caring Conversations, Making Your Wishes Known For End-Of-Life Care** - is a workbook that includes a questionnaire to help you have "caring conversations" about end-of-life decisions. It is available through Midwest Bioethics Center Town Pavilion Suite 2900, 1100 Walnut Street Kansas City, Missouri 64106, telephone number 1-816-221-1100, website: [www.midbio.org](http://www.midbio.org).